

Platform Address  
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# Thankful: For what and to whom?

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## Opening Words:

Life is a gift to us and through us;  
Let us be open to its flow,  
Let us be open to sharing  
our special life-gift with others.  
We meet in celebration  
of the life that is given to and through us.  
Let us, this morning, turn our thoughts  
to how we can:  
touch, and be touched;  
love, and be loved;  
forgive, and be forgiven;  
heal, and be healed;  
So that the goodness of our lives  
can be a shared blessing.

## Spoken Meditation:

*Adapted from Congregation of Abraxas reading*

At this time of Thanksgiving,  
let us be aware  
of our dependence on the earth  
and on the sustaining presence  
of other human beings  
both living and gone before us.

Let our thanksgiving for life's bounty  
include a commitment  
to changing the world,  
that those who are now hungry  
may be filled  
and those without hope  
may become courageous.

# Platform Address

## Thankful: For What and To Whom?

I have borrowed the question in this morning's title from John H. Dietrich. John Dietrich is known, among other things, for being the person who first brought the word "humanism" into the American vocabulary to describe the naturalistic and social philosophy which many of us in Ethical Culture share. Dietrich was first a Dutch Reformed minister; eventually, after his philosophy changed, he came to the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, a former freethinkers' group which had joined the Unitarians as long as they didn't ever have to call themselves a "church" or have a religious leader or minister imposed upon them. John Dietrich, with others, modified the programming of that society, modeling it on an Ethical Society.

My grandparents were members of the society in 1929, the year in which Dietrich spoke one Sunday with an address by this same title. My grandparents were probably at the Sunday program to hear these words spoken, 68 years, the Sunday before Thanksgiving. I have adapted Dietrich's words slightly. He said, in that address:

"We are approaching once more the annual festival of Thanksgiving. . . . This festival occupies a special place among the . . . national festivals observed in this country. It is often spoken of as a uniquely American festival, since no other country has its exact equivalent. As a matter of fact, it bears the familiar marks of the ancient harvest festival; but it has the larger scope suggested by its new name. It was instituted by the [Pilgrims] to render thanks, not only for the bounties of nature, such as they were, in that first hard year of their life on this continent, but for all God's dealings with them and their cause -- in the words of the book of common prayer, for their "creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life."

Dietrich goes on: "I always approach this festival with mingled feelings of gladness and regret -- gladness that it spreads so much joy among [people] and regret that it suggests an irrational attitude toward the benefits of human life; gladness that the customs which it has gathered about it, and which are no part of the original idea, promote a better feeling among [people], and regret that it should perpetuate a superstition which is entirely discredited by modern thought. So Thanksgiving Day does two things to me -- it touches my emotion and it offends my reason."

The title I have used today is the same that Dietrich used 68 years ago -- "Thankful -- for what and to whom?" I believe that the answers we have today are somewhat, but not entirely, different.

Dietrich goes on to express his irritation with typical Thanksgiving words. We would find similar words today across America; for although Dietrich thought that the "superstition" was "entirely discredited by modern thought," it sure has persisted!

Dietrich continues, "The President of the United States summons the nation to church on Thanksgiving Day to give thanks to "Almighty God" for the abundant harvest and all other blessings. But what has Almighty God -- I have no desire [Dietrich says] to appear irreverent -- what has Almighty God as a personal being to do with the harvests? If it is he who produces our crops, then being Almighty there should never be a failure of crops. But since crops frequently fail, it follows that there is no Almighty person in charge of them -- unless he brings failure purposely. Therefore, if God is to be thanked for large crops, he must be blamed when the crops are a failure. . . . If God sends the rain and the sunshine which develops and ripens our wheat, who sends the storms and the insects which destroy much of it? And if he sends both, then why not thank him for one and blame him for the other?"

It is not my intent today to continue this typical argument against the kind of Almighty and personal God to whom the President of the United States even in our day urges thanks. But I do want to extend the argument that Dietrich was making, and see where it takes us.

"We thank thee, Lord, for these thy gifts which we are about to receive." This typical thanksgiving prayer, I find, has a positive side and a negative side.

The good effect is, I believe more and more, that it is a good thing for us to recognize the good that happens to us. It is easy, too easy, to see the bad that happens all the time, whether caused by our own actions, those of others around

us, or the random workings of the Universe. And it is easy, too easy, to emphasize these bad things. There's even a book: "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." There's not a parallel title: "When Good Things Happen to Bad People," or, perhaps more to the point, "When Good Things Happen Even If We Don't Entirely Deserve Them." It is a good discipline to be thankful.

Being thankful requires, first of all, being *aware* of those good things in our lives. This awareness is not easy, nor common. We need to "count our blessings" more often -- and sometimes, this means that we need a special holiday, a day of recognition in order to count those blessings, to remember them, to become aware of them. The first half of my title -- Thankful -- for what -- is the easy part. We should be thankful for those good things that happen to us: for those things that make our life better than it would have been without them. Thanksgiving customs remind us to be thankful, fundamentally, for those material resources that allow our life to continue. We, here, have enough food, at least almost all the time, so that we are not genuinely hungry. We also have the basic comforts of home and health, in varying measures.

When I was in theological school, for one class we had to practice marriage counseling. In one situation, I was role-playing the wife and a good friend role-playing the husband. We describe a seemingly difficult problem and several of our fellow students tried to "help" us out. None were doing particularly well, when another student, who comes from a Japanese Buddhist tradition in which counseling plays a central role.

This student asked if he could try, and then he came and sat in front of my friend and me. "Are you healthy?" he asked, and we said, "yes." "Are your children healthy?" he asked. Again, "yes." "Do you have food, and a home?" "yes." "Okay, then, you don't have problems, you have issues."

It transformed my own thinking about those seemingly insurmountable relationship problems that we sometimes will have — distinguishing problems such as a loss of health, or material security — from issues, which we have the luxury of attacking after we find some basic security.

Yet, while it is fundamental to have these basic *material* blessings in place, it is also important to have what some might call as "spiritual" blessings: love of friends, of family, past and present; healthy, fulfilling relationships; a vision or perspective of how we want to live in our communities; the knowledge and creativity to grow and develop; beauty of nature and of art; the basic freedoms, of mind, body, and spirit; and so on. We all experience these blessings to some extent, but we all could probably wish for more of these.

The appreciation of ourselves, of all human beings, is part of the larger gratitude. The central ethical principle is our commitment to affirm the intrinsic worth of every human being. This isn't something we can prove rationally -- that every person has worth. But it is our ethical commitment, our version of religious commitment, to affirm that worth, to attribute that worth, to act as if it is true, for we know that appreciating all others as human beings will produce the kind of world in which human beings can thrive, grow, and become more fully themselves.

Even as we affirm human worth, we forget, too often, to be grateful for it. We can discuss all we want about whether humans have worth, and what to do about it. We also need to appreciate that gift of worth, the gift that every individual in their uniqueness brings to the world.

And that appreciation must be for ourselves, too, and our own uniqueness and worth — not just that of others. To appreciate ourselves -- rather than depreciating, or deprecating, ourselves and other human beings -- is central to what our ethical community is about.

Here are words spoken by the founder of the first Ethical Society, Felix Adler:

May the humanity  
that is within every human being  
be held more and more precious,  
and be regarded  
with ever deepening reverence.  
The vice that underlies all vices  
is that we are held cheap by others,

and far worse,  
that in our innermost soul  
we think cheaply of ourselves.  
Felix Adler

To value ourselves, to value every distinct human being as essential to the whole of existence, is part of the ethical spirit of Thanksgiving.

Beyond and beneath all these objects for our gratitude, the very gift of life is worth being thankful for. I want to share with you one of my favorite readings, this from the author, Frederick Buechner:

### Life is *With*

The temptation is always to reduce life to size. A bowl of cherries. A rat race. Amino acids. Even to call it a mystery smacks of reductionism. It is *the* mystery.

As far as anybody seems to know, the vast majority of things in the universe do not have whatever life is. Sticks, stones, stars, space -- they simply *are*. A few things *are* and are somehow aware of it. They have broken through into Something, or Something has broken through into them. Even a jellyfish, a butternut squash. They're in it with us. We're all in it together, or it in us. Life is *it*. Life is *with*.

After lecturing learnedly on miracles, a theologian was asked to give a specific example of one. "There is only one miracle," he answered. "It is life."

*Have you wept at anything during the past year?*

*Has your heart beat faster at the sight of young beauty?*

*Have you thought seriously about the fact that someday you are going to die?*

*More often than not do you really listen when people are speaking to you instead of just waiting for your turn to speak?*

*Is there anybody you know in whose place, if one of you had to suffer great pain, you would volunteer yourself?*

If your answer to all or most of these questions is No, the chances are that you're dead.

Frederick Buechner  
*Listening to Your Life*  
HarperSanFrancisco, 1992

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So yes in case there was any question -- I am definitely in favor of *being* thankful, of reminding ourselves of the bounty we enjoy, both materially and spiritually.

But to *give* thanks -- to whom (or to what) should we give our thanks?

It was clear to the Pilgrims whom they were thanking -- it was their Almighty God.

Yet, they seemed to have an instinct that it was not just their God whom they wanted to thank. Part of our story of the First Thanksgiving is that the Pilgrims invited their neighbors, the Indians, in recognition of the momentous role the Indians had in helping the Pilgrims make it in their new, chosen land. The spirit of thankfulness extended to these neighbors.

Although, even this is not so clear. By that day we identify as "the first Thanksgiving," the Indians' population had plummeted, primarily because of the diseases brought by the previous waves of Europeans. Their ability to raise and find food had been disrupted, and this was a free meal, perhaps some of the best food possible for them, too, that fall. Thanking the Indians was not a strong nor lasting part of Pilgrim culture.

Further, with more than a hundred guests, the five remaining women of the Pilgrim colony bore almost the entire responsibility for preparing that feast. Thanking of the cook, was not much considered at the First Thanksgiving, either.

Thanking the Almighty God for all gifts is not adequate, not even ethical, not because I can prove with logic that God cannot be Almighty and All-Good, but because we lose important connections with the real world when we fail to thank *all* who are responsible — people, impersonal powers, even chance and luck.

We can begin with the Universe that happens to exist with the conditions that sustain our lives: a small difference in the conditions at the beginning of time, and matter would not have formed stars like our sun. Or consider a small difference in the temperature of the Sun, small in star-terms, and there could be no water here, no atmosphere, no humans. We can continue with thanks that the Earth happens to exist at the right distance from that Sun to sustain human life, and with thanks to the long line of algae and other living things that created our atmosphere. We can thank our animal and human ancestors that, in the long history of evolution, solved the problems of existence so that we, these particular individuals here, could be born.

When we look at the bread on our table — it is not just the forces of wind and rain and soil that created that bread. Someone, long ago, figured out how to tame the wild wheat, and we should be thankful to her or him. Much nearer to us — the farmers who grew the wheat, the hens that laid the eggs, the cows that gave the milk, the plants that grew the cranberries, even -- the turkey. It was traditional in many hunting societies to remember to thank the animal life that was sacrificed that we might live. It would behoove us, at least those of us who are not vegetarians, to revive a bit of that custom.

We can also be thankful to those who shopped for the goods on our Thanksgiving table, for those who cooked it (like our five lonely Pilgrim foremothers), those who carved the meat, those who earned the money to pay the bill. We can be thankful not only for those who grew the food, prepared and packaged it, sold and transported it, but also those who invented all the ways that helped get all that food to our tables.

In other words, our thankfulness is for the fruits of this great mystery of human cooperation, and of human interdependence with all the natural world.

To be thankful only to some Nameless One, or to a supernatural God, removes real mystery and beauty. It separates us from our own active role in the human community. If we are thankful only to God for the goods that come to us, material and spiritual, we may not recognize the real world, one in which human cooperation and interdependence are at work. And, if we do not recognize those forces, we may not tend to our role in the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Imagine: no matter what your view of war, what it means to thank God for a victory in war. First, it demeans the very real sacrifice of human life that went into that war -- diminishes the meaning of the work and struggle that real human beings spent in the fight. Second, it implies that this God could find no other way to achieve whatever goals the war was meant to achieve. God was not powerful enough to change the other side's thinking, short of war. Thanking God for victory demeans that very God.

Ultimately, thanking God for a war victory removes our human responsibility to avoid war, to prevent war, or to choose our wars with great care. It makes war too easy.

Similarly, with any giving of thanks that does not recognize the real contributors to the blessings we have: if we only thank some God, then we demean those who brought us these blessings. We diminish the meaning of human cooperation and human interaction. And, ultimately, we remove our human responsibility to similarly contribute to the welfare and good life of others. It is pure escapism.

A celebration of humanity and the natural world ought to be the basic message of Thanksgiving. But we should not stop there. We should remember, whenever we recognize the great goods with which we are blessed, that these are often beyond what we have "earned," beyond what we "deserve." And, yes, some often get much less than they've earned, much less than they deserve.

I think of a newer custom around Thanksgiving, one begun long after John Dietrich's and my grandparent's day: a ceremonial dinner which a group called Oxfam often puts on, and which several Ethical Societies adapt. Dinner tickets are sold, at a standard price. Oxfam is, after all, raising money as well as raising consciousness with this Thanksgiving Feast. Oxfam, you may know, is one of the better groups in the world that tackle issues of world hunger -- a higher percentage of contributions that actually reach the hungry than in too many organizations. And they not only concentrate on direct feeding of the hungry in crisis situations, but strive to build programs that will have a longer-lasting effect -- where people learn the skills and get the equipment they need to feed themselves, long after the direct assistance is gone.

I find these Oxfam dinners fascinating. As the guests enter, each is given a coded ticket, randomly assigning each person to different parts of the banquet hall. Husband and wife, friends who come together, are often separated -- just as in real life, we often have different circumstances handed to us randomly.

Some very few sit at a head table, and are served a multi-course dinner, served with crystal and silver and china, and by waiters dressed in formal attire. Some others, a larger number but still a small minority, are seated at nearby tables, and receive a well-balanced, hearty meal, but one that is served on quite ordinary plates and which is what most of us might consider an ordinary family dinner.

The vast majority, however, receive only a small bowl of rice and some water to drink. And, all seated in the same room, they eat their dinners.

The percentages are carefully calculated by the Oxfam people to match the real world's hunger situation. Most people in our world barely have enough food to survive, in ill health, with low immunity. To sit in a room and actually *experience* this difference is an amazing event. It adds another dimension to thankfulness. Those eating the sumptuous versions of the meals, seated in the same room, with the poverty of the others so visible, are aware, as few of us are, of the true extent of our blessings -- and the true extent of our responsibility.

For, I think, that which we are grateful for also brings responsibilities. Responsibility: first, to make the blessings that we have available more and more widely; second, to be comfortable with enough instead of too much; third, to pay attention to the actual effects, down the line, of what we accumulate or what we do; and fourth, to me the most important: to commit ourselves to the human family and to the full extent of our interdependent existence, not *just* to our individual lives.

So here are the answers I have to the question I borrowed for today from John Dietrich: thankful for what and to whom?

If by life we mean not just physical existence, but the "bread *and* roses" -- then we can join with the Pilgrims in identifying the "what for" of thanksgiving: the creation of life (more bountiful, more pleasant, more just), the preservation of that bountiful, happy, just life, and all the blessings of life, of existence. That is what we should be grateful for.

And, we can identify the "to whom" of truly being thankful, if we are thankful *to* the forces that brought us those blessings -- the people, the natural world, all of existence.

And, finally, the *unasked* question of thanksgiving -- Why? That question is answered if we accept that thanksgiving brings with it responsibility, for further creation, preservation, and all the blessings of life, for ourselves and the rest of the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.

This ethical Thanksgiving spirit is one of gratitude for the real, of hope for the better, and of commitment to closing the gap between those the real and the hope. It is a pragmatic idealism, this gratitude which does not forget what yet needs to be done. It is this same pragmatic idealism which inspired Robert Ingersoll — decades before John Dietrich spoke — to rattle off these words, when he was asked by a reporter one day what creed he lived by, if not the religious creeds. It is a creed worth living by today, too:

My creed:  
To love justice, to long for the right,  
to love mercy,  
to pity the suffering, to assist the weak,  
to forget wrongs and remember benefits,  
to love the truth, to be sincere,  
to utter honest words, to love liberty,  
to wage relentless war  
against slavery in all its forms,  
to love family and friend,  
to make a happy home,  
to love the beautiful in art, in nature,  
to cultivate the mind,  
to be familiar with the mighty thoughts  
    that genius has expressed,  
the noble deeds of all the world;  
to cultivate courage and cheerfulness,  
to make others happy,  
to fill life with the splendor of generous acts,  
    the warmth of loving words;  
to discard error, to destroy prejudice,  
to receive new truths with gladness,  
to cultivate hope,  
to see the calm beyond the storm,  
    the dawn beyond the night,  
to do the best that can be done  
and then be resigned.  
This is the religion of reason,  
the creed of science.  
This satisfies the brain and the heart.

-- *Robert G. Ingersoll*

In the ethical spirit of Thanksgiving, as I've described it, I ask that we begin the morning's discussion period a bit differently. Each of you may have identified, as I spoke, or you may think of this during the reflection time, some particular Thanks that you want to express -- thanks for something in particular, to someone or something in particular, and even, perhaps, a responsibility which you accept. I invite you to share with us your thanks.